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ABSTRACT

American society and its educators are faced with many challenges, particularly from the growing use of computers, which lead to the question of whether the American dream of a viable democracy with an equal chance for all can be revived. The individual, community, thought, and morality provide four standpoints from which to consider technological and other challenges to society and its educational system. Individuals require some technological expertise to be productive members of modern society, but they must also be able to function in a social context. Education can emphasize intergroup experiences and maintain a balance between technique and humanistic understandings. The use of computers and the concept of not being used by them or their anonymous programmers could be educational themes. Democratic societies depend on the schools to prepare reflective, critically thinking individuals. The informed teacher provides the avenue toward thoughtful reflection and interaction far better than any computer. At its deepest level, the problem of reviving the American dream is a moral one. Schools should provide education for justice. Ethics also play an important role in computer access and use. An 18-item bibliography is provided. (ESR)

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REVIVING THE AMERICAN DREAM

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Reviving the American Dream

American society and its educators are faced with many challenges. Spurred on by scientific advances, our country is caught up in a headlong race with other world powers to gain technological supremacy. The need for a well trained and productive citizenry is implicit in a technocratic world. On the other hand, our pluralistic culture demands an education both equal and just for its many diverse groups and individuals. Educators strain to provide a curriculum equipped with both common core and individualized experiences. The computer and its army of programs promise the solution to both problems. Falling SAT scores, uninterested students, and hostile publics all will be assuaged by technologized education. Technically trained students will provide the future work force for an automated society. The American Dream of success and happiness for all will be realized. Tomorrow's shiny new world will be permeated with freedom, equality, and justice.

The gleam on the shiny Apple IIe has barely dulled before educators discern a deeper mix of problems inherent in a society alienated by the automated world of robots and

fractionalized by rifts in the social fabric. Privatism, social fragmentation, and the loss of the child as a complete human being are symptoms of a brave new world of scientism and cool efficiency. Civic pride and moral purpose are artifacts of another age of involvement and cooperation. Even the skilled future worker emerges as one usually assigned to lower order work while a small elite are the architects of social, governmental, economic, and educational activities. Can the American Dream of a viable democracy with an equal chance for all be revived, or is it a lost hope from a more naive time? Can American education be energized with a sense of purpose promoting civic involvement, respect for the individual, and moral rectitude as well as inculcating intellectual skills and manual dexterity?

Like the philosopher Merleau-Ponty, we can consider ourselves aware of our responsibility to awaken the community to its true function and in the process recognize the absolute relation which binds us to others.¹

The individual, community, thought, and morality provide standpoints from which to consider the challenge to society and its educational system.

The Individual

The individual is unique but never separated from the world. "I am given . . . already situated and involved in a physical and social world."² The self's contact with the

social is "revealed . . . as the point of origin of all truth."³ The self cannot and should not forget its grounding in the world. In the education of the individual, assertiveness training and success orientation need balancing with social awareness and political astuteness. Relating to education and phenomenological concerns, Collins argues for an education which recognizes the need to involve learners in the three levels of morality--the personal, the dialogic, and the institutional.⁴ Educators must recognize the interdependence of the three spheres of human existence.

The person discovers himself/herself in the social milieu where subjectivity and objectivity meet. The authentic individual helps to create his/her society and its institutions. Education of the individual would encourage dynamic self belief which propelled the person into a life of challenge and of reward.

In Landscapes of Learning, Greene describes the all too common reaction of the individual who escapes into himself:

To take refuge within one's inwardness may well be to disarm oneself as a social being, to render oneself doubly vulnerable to the mystifications that legitimate manipulation and conditioning. Under such circumstances can the self remain inviolable?⁵

The education of the self must relate to the spheres of others and of the world if it is to be complete. To be a functioning member of the community, the individual must take an active role.

To be a productive member of our modern society, the individual requires some technological expertise. Most will require computer literacy and some, more advanced programming skills. Each, regardless of background, gender, or race, requires access to machines and skilled teachers. But education must maintain a balance between technique and humanistic understandings. Particular attention needs to be given the person who closets himself/herself with his computer ally and shuns further social contact. To be human, the individual must associate and communicate with others for sensitivity in personal, social, and ethical decisions. The authentic individual and the alert citizen are caught up in life. Educators must remain in control of education. To become caretakers of machines would be a desertion of their responsibilities to both the child and the society which s/he will inherit.

Community

The self and other create a social world. The community is the context of educational and social enterprise. In our modern age, the term community has a hollow ring as selfish egoism and pressure groups vie for control. In a

holistic community, individuals structure the world. Encountering the other, the self discovers more of himself and another style of being as well. In Mallin's words, "the other permeates not only my present field but my entire world."⁶ Cool detachment and mechanical efficiency have no place in the shared social world. Rationality and emotions both have parts to play in an education operating from the perspective of a common world and a shared dream of progress. Referring to "Education and the American Dream," Greene suggested:

Only a free and critical consciousness is capable of a true dream; only an authentic and reflective partisanship gives rise to passion; only passion can sustain such a dream.⁷

Eschewing a selfish privatism, the subject plunges into life, recognizes the need for others, and approaches the community of humankind.

An enlightened citizenry is the first line of defense against totalitarianism. The responsible citizen is a key figure in supporting, defending, and preserving the American Dream of equality, justice, and freedom. Civic education can undo the sense of alienation felt by some individuals and the separatism evidenced by some groups in our diverse society. Democracy demands commitment, responsibility, and action. Passivity and retreatism are

characteristics of a moribund democracy. Butts's viewpoint on civic education is in agreement:

My view is that the goal of civic education for American schools is to deal with all students in such a way as to motivate them and enable them to play their parts as informed, responsible, committed, and effective members of a modern democratic political system ⁸

Unity in diversity and uniqueness with the recognition of interconnectedness would be the themes of a civic education which sought to put each individual and group in dialogue with one another.

It is through dialogue that individuals recognize one another as co-partners in a swiftly changing world. Education can emphasize inter-group experiences with persons of differing ages, interests, and lifestyles creating situations rife with challenging communication opportunities. Greene strikes a similar note when she calls for persons "with the capacity to look through the perspectives of those around them and of those likely to be affected by what they say or do."⁹

Dialogue would also be encouraged with the computer. Over the course of educational experiences, Logo to Pascal would become familiar to learners. Bits and bytes would be considered within the framework of human dialogue. Using

computers and not being used by them or their anonymous programmers would be educational themes. The promise of many program communities of educational, recreational, and research interests could receive educational attention, also. Lane Jennings describes "Computopia" where the good life is achieved in a "personal yet communal, secure yet flexible, practical yet spiritually fulfilling"¹⁰ manner. Educators can spotlight the promises and problems of our dawning computer age through discussion, research, and resource persons.

Thinking

If the dominance of truly human dialogue were to disappear, the computerized society would threaten rather than sustain a viable democracy. DeRougmont fears the vulnerability of modern day society. He cites dependency, unthinkingness, defenselessness, and centralization as computer associated risks. In reference to education, he believes data processing will replace learning; simulation will replace knowledge.¹¹ The place and destiny of thought in an information society is significant for every educator.

To continue to exist, democratic societies depend on the schools, particularly the public schools, to prepare reflective, critically thinking individuals. Able to discern truth from fiction and differentiate information from propaganda, aware citizens choose leaders and make

electoral choices rationally. Schools can contribute to growth in thinking with debate, problem research, and analysis of historic themes. The emphasis would be on conceptualizing and not on carpentry. As Lucas points out, some projects completed by eighth graders appear to be products of enthusiastic craftwork rather than conceptual discovery.¹²

Heidegger, too, is concerned with our technological age's devotion to calculative thinking rather than meditative thought. Holding man's essential nature to be meditative, Heidegger considers the issue of our time "is the saving of man's essential nature."¹³ If educators were to take heed, they would encourage thoughtful discussion and essay writing rather than the absorption of strictly factual information and the ubiquitous answer sheet which, often corrected by machine, requires only recognition and superficial knowledge. The informed teacher provides the environment and the avenue toward thoughtful reflection and interaction far better than any machine. The rush to place even three-year-olds in front of computer consoles could have dire results. DeRougemont points out that exposure to computers before the age of eighteen can cause slower mental development; the brain becomes lazy.¹⁴

Morality

At its deepest level, the problem of reviving the American Dream is a moral one. With Heidegger we may ask

what is man's nature and where is he going? Our schools, our democratic institutions, and our future depend on the answers to those questions. Heidegger's response to the challenge of our age is:

And it is we who think if we know ourselves here and now as the men who must find and prepare the way into the atomic age, through it, and out of it . . . we should arrive at a path that will lead to a new ground and foundation. In that ground the creativity which produces lasting works could strike new roots.¹⁵

Merleau-Ponty's view of society considers morality as stemming from respect for others and virtue as an affirmation of a universal bond between all humans. It would be a morality related to a continually changing situation.

True morality does not consist in following exterior rules or in respecting objective value. There are no ways to be just or to be saved ¹⁶

From this perspective, moral education would relate to life as lived. Neither opportunism nor apathy would be considered legitimate options. Groups and individuals structure values in committed response to a community of equals. Using freedom responsibly, the person of thought and action would view the other as another I. It would be an intersubjective awareness. The other's suffering becomes that

of the subject. Encompassing others, education becomes universal. It is education for justice. The ethics of education would support programs devoted to enriching the life of the disadvantaged and increasing their opportunities to adequately meet the challenge of today's complex world. Civic education would relate to the question of justice and would invite discussion, debate, and simulation concerning the complex and challenging question. Educational programs, evaluation procedures, entrance requirements, and criteria of results could be included. Only in the democratic manner can the outlines of the American Dream be hammered out in the public forum of thoughtful debate.

Ethics plays an important role in computer access and use. Hackers who break and enter often have no moral qualms. To quote one, "We felt it was not really an illegal thing to do because we didn't intend any harm."¹⁷ The amoral or immoral perspective of some computer whizzes and their more hardened criminal counterparts needs to be addressed by educators in an age often described as the computer age. More than skills must be passed on. The American Dream could flounder on the rocks of immorality and opportunism. DeRougmont is in accord in his concern over creating material powers without a like increase in the spiritual in our societies.¹⁸ Educators are challenged to create a moral society as well as a materially successful society.

The technological age dawns full of promises and problems for the American Dream, its schools, and educators. Much can be accomplished if we choose to create our future rather than being shaped by it. The gap between morality and high tech can be bridged if we have but the will to do so.

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